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Lawmakers, citizens talk health care at Des Moines meeting

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) -- Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin is criticizing the state of the nation's health care system, saying it lacks preventative care and wellness education.

"We don't have a health care system in America, we have a sick care system," he said. "If you get sick, you get care ... But there are precious few incentive out there to keep you well, to keep you healthy, to keep you out of the hospital in the first place."

Harkin joined Iowa lawmakers and citizens Saturday at a meeting to discuss improving America's health care system.

The forum was hosted by Citizens' Health Care Working Group, a nonpartisan organization formed under the Medicare Prescription Drug Act of 2003. The group is holding a series of meetings throughout the country. Its recommendations will be presented to the president and Congress.

Harkin, D-Iowa, said it is important to implement programs that encourage good health, including tax breaks for businesses who buy employees fitness memberships, legislation that allows small businesses to take part in the federal employees' insurance program and funding for community-based wellness programs.

"We need to fundamentally redirect our focus in America to caring for the health of society as a whole, not thinking about just individuals," he said.

Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, sent a letter that was read at the meeting. It expressed the importance of constituents coming together to present feedback on health care issues.

The Citizens' Health Care Working Group released a public report in October to educate Americans on the current status of the nation's health care system, and get them talking about issues.

The report, titled "The Health Report to the American People," included information on what services are available, the costs, how to finance health care, insurance, community plans and how technology will be used in the future.

According to the group, health care in 2003 cost Americans \$1.7 trillion, or about \$6,400 per person, and costs are increasing rapidly. Even with the expense, most adults got only about 55 percent of the recommended care, and almost 46 million Americans have no access to health care, the group said.

"It's like a runaway train, we've got to get a grip on this somehow," said Rep. Leonard Boswell, D-Iowa. "To get it out here in the open and the daylight I think is one of the best things we can do."

Deb Stehr, of Lake View, is a member of the Citizens' Health Care Working Group, and a full-time caregiver for her adult son, Jonathan, who has cerebral palsy. She said the meetings are an opportunity to have a voice in the national health care debate.

"Iowans can make a difference by engaging in this discussion about health care that works for all Americans," Stehr said.

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